EDUCATION IN THE KAVYAS OF ASVAGHOSHA

SARIKA DHIMAN*

*Junior Research Fellow, 
Department of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, 
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.

INTRODUCTION

The word education comes to us from the Latin word educare, meaning to train, nurture or bring up a child physically or mentally.\(^1\) ‘Man cannot propose’ says Plato, the pre-eminent educational philosopher of all ages, ‘a higher or holier object for his study than education and all that pertains to education.\(^2\) Devoid of education, as put by Bhartrihari, man was nothing short of a beast. It was nothing else but education that elevated a man into a perfect human being.\(^3\)

The importance of education has been realized since times immemorial and continues right up to this day. India is pregnant with an affluent tradition of knowledge and learning from the earliest days of Indian civilization. There are several literary sources, such as the Vedas and other Hindu texts and scriptures, which offer references about education system of the ancient societies. The Mahabharata, some Dharma sutras(particularly those of Gautama Buddha and Apastamba) and the Manu Smriti are the principal works dealing with the system of education in ancient India. To begin, with, in ancient India, the main subject of study was the Vedas. The curriculum of studies was, however, modified in post-Vedic times. It was no longer purely ritualistic but was broad-based and included subjects like grammar, philosophy and those of a secular nature.\(^4\) The spread of Buddhism and Jainism in India enriched the education in ancient India. In this period education became available to everyone and various celebrated educational institutions were established at that instant. Kautilya’s Arthasastra, though a book on science of polity, gives reference to the sort of educational system prevailing during the time period of the Mauryas. It seems that legacy was continued to a great extent. After the decline of the Mauryan empire India witnessed the incursions of the foreign elements (Greeks, Sakas, Pahlavas and Kusanas) which caused social convulsions and political disturbances. During this period convergence of new ideas in the social and religious field took place. Of these foreign elements Kusana age was a period of great prominence (especially of Kaniska-I, the Kusana emperor).

Asvaghosa, a great Buddhist and Indian philosopher-poet, said to be born in Saketa in northern India to a Brahmana family. He is believed to have been the first Sanskrit dramatist and is considered the greatest Indian poet prior to Kalidasa. The tradition associates the work of Asvaghosa with the reign of Kaniska-I, the Kusana ruler (the last quarter of the first century and the first decade of the early second century). As a poet Asvaghosa is revealed to us through his two kavyas, the Buddhacarita and the Saundarananda. A careful study of the two kavyas of Asvaghosa shows that the poet was a well-read man and he was accurate in his knowledge.\(^5\) The Buddhacarita records the acts of the Buddha from his birth to his demise.\(^5\) The Saundarananda, a poem retelling the conversion of the Buddha’s cousin Nanda. His works are reflection of the
Indian society of that period. Nevertheless, the theme of these two kavyas is religion based, the poet gives us glimpse of educational system prevalent in the contemporary society. As witnessed society was undergoing many changes during this period and education a very influential factor in social change, necessitates the study of education of the period.

The relationship between the teacher and student has always been one of prime importance in the educational field. The teacher had certain obligations to his pupils which he was to discharge during the period of their stay. The latter too were enjoined to perform certain duties towards their preceptor. A student was initiated to education by the traditional rite called Upnayana. A teacher was called Guru and he was highly respected by the pupil, public and the king. Education was imparted by very learned scholars of different arts. In the epics (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) Guru is regarded as the master who opens the eyes of the disciples blinded by darkness and ignorance. The same expression is found in the Saundarananda. Education planning was in conformity with the needs of the people. The education of common man and kings, princes, warriors, technicians and the like seem to differ. Siddhartha was imparted education suitable for his race. A student is called (Sisya) pupil and they had certain duties towards their preceptor known as Sisya Dharma. Asvaghosa refers to the students living with their teachers, in the hermitages. Iksvaku’s sons lived with sage Kapila in the hermitage. The students serve their teachers and gathered wood, flowers and Kusa grass for their sustenance. Our poet refers to certain ‘Dharma’ to be observed by a Sisya. Nanda passed through all the stages of ‘Sisya Dharma’ and attained Arhatship. Devoted faith in the Law (dharma) is mentioned as the essential quality in a Sisya to acquire knowledge. Knowledge was also diffused through wandering teachers popularly known as ‘Charakas’ or ‘Pravrajakas’. On Nanda’s conquering himself the sage was pleased and hence onwards it became fruitful for him to adopt a wanderer’s life but anyone with unsubdued and unstable senses was never permitted to adopt a wanderer’s life. Asvaghosa described Buddha as a wanderer. Buddha went out to preach and as a result king of Kapilavastu (Suddhodana, father of Buddha) and many young Sakya nobles adopted a pravrajaka’s life. Nanda, when gained self-control and Arhatship, went to his Guru (Buddha) for Gurudiksa. Nanda was directed to help others by preaching the Law. Nanda, indifferent to gain or loss, free from the yearning of senses, preached the faith in Kapilavastu to the masses.

A man can discharge his debt to the seers only ‘by the Vedas’ and “that liberation is for him only who strives thus in accordance with Vedic injunctions” shows the importance attached to the Vedas. Life of sages represents more of Brahmanical colouring in the hermitages rather than the Buddhist way of living in the Viharas. Munis in the forests, practised austeritys according to various scriptures and under varying rules. The poet has referred to Rajasstra, Nitisastra and Dandaniti. Asvaghosa employed the term Rajasstra for the science of politics and treated as standard authorities the works of Sukra and Brhaspati (the sons of Bhrigu and Angiras). They are regularly coupled together as the authors of the first treatises on political science. The court poet, however, must also be familiar with the doctrine of nitisastroar statecraft. The Buddhacarita refers to Udayin as an authority on niti or the science of worldly conduct and the world-wide principles are unfolded to the prince by the priest attached to the royal household in order to divert his mind from meditation and in the Saundaranandareference to dandaniti is made. Asvaghosa’s reference to warrior and scholar (“Astra and Sastras” Vidhya) gives account of existence of polity of warfare and administration during the
period. Asvaghosa tells that engineering science or VastuSastra was developed. It was studied and put into practice is clearly evident from the description of the city of Kapilavastu as “…a city which was majestic through their knowledge of townplanning”. Asvaghosa seems to be acquainted with KamaSastra. Asvaghosa tells that king Suddhodana made special arrangement for ‘Visyaprarchar’ (application of sensual attractions) for Siddhartha. In the Buddhacarita, after marriage Siddhartha was so much fascinated in the palace of women, who were expert in the accessories of love, that he did not descend from the palace to the ground. In the Saundarananda the description of amorous amusements of Nanda and Sundari, the powerful expressions of love-making and references to the god of love: Kandarpa and Rati and God of fish banner are worth notice. In brief the giles and wiles of women, such as gestures to cause rapture with brows, looks and blandishments, with laughter, frolicking and movements to captivate the prince all are the arts described in Kamasutra. Asvaghosa refers to the method of Yoga in the Buddhacarita e.g. Janaka instructing the twice-born in the methods of Yoga. The poet has used the word ‘Yoga’ and ‘Yogi’ many a times. The Buddhacarita’s canto XII and the Saundarananda’s canto XVI deal with Yoga and Dhyana. Asvaghosa’s description of Siddhartha’s meeting with sage Arada and the exposition of the Samkhya philosophy by the sage, rejection of the same by Siddhartha tells about the Samkhya system of the day and interpretation of it by the Buddha. From the references of Yoga and Samkhya in his kavyas it is clear that they are important philosophies during poet’s era.

The content of Saundarananda indicates towards Asvaghosa’s knowledge of Nyayasutras. According to Johnston, Asvaghosa had knowledge at least of the first section of the Nyayasutras. There is a clear reference to Nyaya principles at Saundarananda i.14. Professional education, the science of medicine and surgery seems to have developed much by the time of our poet. Asvaghosa has mentioned surgical instruments, ‘forceps and jaws’ and surgeons. He refers to skilful surgeons performing delicate operations in extracting splinters lodged near the heart. He calls him (Buddha) The Chief of Physicians (BhisakPradhan) and Great Physician (Mahabhisak) as no one excelled him in this art and he cured the diseases of body and mind. Asvaghosa has also mentioned about some charms to ward off the effect of snake bite. Rsi Atreya incidentally finds mention as the first propounder of the science of healing. Asvaghosa works reveal his deep knowledge of Ayurvedic treatment of various diseases. Remedies for the deadly poisoned persons and antidotes of medicines were also known in the age. Serious as well as ordinary diseases, are mentioned along with their cures. Fever, headache, blood–vomiting etc. as diseases of the body and ‘Defective Senses’ and madness or maniac as mental diseases are mentioned. Asvaghosa has given philosophic definition of diseases and cures, as well as has referred to Ayurvedic medicines.

Asvaghosa’s works give a fair glimpse of Astronomy. The references made by him show the developed science. PusyaNaksatra (planet) is mentioned many a times. The earth, the moon, the sun and Brahaspati planets are specifically mentioned. The art or science of astrology was well developed and there lived professional astrologers and astronomers but our poet has condemned, ‘Jyotisa’ or astrology as the destroyer of good conduct but references of constellation of stars, auspicious and inauspicious days point to the development of astronomy. The grammatical usage of Asvaghosa stands between that of the epics and of Kalidasa. The self-expression in Asvaghosa’s poetry gave the introspective thought a place in literary Sanskrit. Upajati is the metre which is abundantly used by Asvaghosa in his Buddhacarita.
Asvaghosa has skillfully employed Udgata and Upasthitapracupita among difficult metres. Employment of the Vipula in the slokas in the two kavyas, which fell out of use in classical kavya, keep the works nearer to the great epics in which it is common enough.\textsuperscript{59} This points that our poet had sound knowledge of grammar and its development during his period, though he does not always comply with the rules of Panini.

Asvaghosa’s knowledge of vedas, vedangas, samkhya philosophy, epics, sastra and astravidhya, grammar, astronomy, astrology etc. and their depiction in his kavyas is a sufficient testimony to the prevalent education of the era.

REFERENCES

2. Ibid., p. 3.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
10. Ibid., I. 39.
15. B. VII. 4.
16. S. XVIII. 22.
17. S. XVIII. 23.
19. S. XVIII. 54-58, 62.
20. B. IX. 65.
22. S. III. 2.
25. B., ft.n., I. 41.
26. J.K. Nariman, Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism, Delhi, 1972, p. 34.
27. B. IV. 62.
28. Nariman, op.cit., p.34.
29. S. II. 28.
30. S. II. 8, B. V. 40, IX. 17.
31. S. I. 41.
32. B. III. 50.
33. B. II. 32.
34. S. IV. 8-11, 13, 16, 17, 19, 23, 35, 36, 38, X. 49, XI. 54.
35. S. IV. 8, X. 53.
36. B. IV. 24, 25.
37. B. I. 45.
38. S. V. 32, 49, XIII. 29, XIV. 19, 34, 46, XV. 68, XVI. 1.
39. B. Intro., pp. LV-LVI.
40. S. XVIII. 7.
42. S. X. 55, XVII. 73.

43. S. V. 31, IX. 13.

44. Law, op.cit., p. 21.

45. S. XVIII. 9.

46. S. IX. 6, XI. 11, 28, XII. 6, XVI. 40,41, XVIII. 13, B. I. 25, III.44.

47. B. XI. 40, S. XV. 3.

48. B. XIV. 54.

49. B. XIV. 20.

50. B. III. 5.

51. S. V. 42.

52. B. I. 9.

53. B. III. 58.

54. S. II. 14, B. IV. 75.

55. B. VII. 8.

56. B. IV. 75.

57. S. XIII. 14.

58. Law, op.cit., p. 36.